



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Training for Women Network

23 May 2012

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Employment and Learning

### Training for Women Network

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)  
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister  
Mr Sammy Douglas  
Ms Michelle Gildernew  
Mr David McIlveen  
Mr Pat Ramsey

**Witnesses:**

Ms Alison Blayney	Training for Women Network
Ms Mary Hogg	Training for Women Network
Ms Kathleen Magennis	Training for Women Network
Mr John Mooney	Training for Women Network

**The Chairperson:** We have the chairperson of the Training for Women Network, Ms Mary Hogg, and her team, who I will invite Mary to introduce.

**Ms Mary Hogg (Training for Women Network):** We have Alison, who is the vice chair of TWN; John, who is a policy and research officer; and Kathleen, who works in finance. Alison will open proceedings.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much.

**Ms Alison Blayney (Training for Women Network):** Thank you, Chair and members. Thanks for the opportunity to make this presentation. We have provided you with a briefing paper, which is in your packs. The aim of the presentation is to determine whether the Committee can apply some scrutiny to the Department-managed European Social Fund (ESF) programme and its implementation to ensure that it is not only compliant with EU regulations, but is seen to be administered in a fair and accountable manner.

EU funding should always be additional to mainstream government programmes to enhance them. It should not be used to replace them, and it should be allocated in a fair and transparent manner that assesses all applicants on a fair playing field. Some of the members here raised their concerns at the Employment and Learning Committee in the last mandate, namely concern about the amendment of the eligible score for ESF funding, which was set by the EU at 130 and amended by the previous Employment and Learning Minister to 134.

Over the past few months, we have revisited the ESF programme to examine how it is being implemented and whether there is any identified available money in the programme. The ESF programme is designed to address unemployment and to upskill people across the Province, often targeting the most disadvantaged areas and people removed from the labour market, the groups most affected by the recession — young people and women — and those affected by the changes in the benefit system.

Further education and the use of local colleges is not a Cinderella shoe: it does not fit everyone. Those who are the most disengaged need a different approach. The ESF programme is the only DEL-sponsored programme that allows that to happen locally. Learner-access engagement has failed in many of those areas to deliver. An example of that has been seen in Kilcooley in Bangor.

From the answers to a couple of Assembly questions (AQs) and some freedom of information (FOI) requests, there seems to have been some slippage in the current budget and some unallocated money. We want to ask the Committee whether there is any leverage to revisit the allocation of the money, because we are only one year into a three-year programme, so there are two years left to spend.

**Ms Kathleen Magennis (Training for Women Network):** In the outworking of the process, there were applications from two bodies that did not take up the funding and a third body had its allocation halved. That left a DEL and ESF contribution of over £2 million at the start of the programme.

**The Chairperson:** How much?

**Ms K Magennis:** About £2 million.

There were two projects on the next score down, which was 133. The amount needed to fund those was £1.45 million, taking into account the ministerial savings required at the time. There was no going below the score of 134 to 133, so we were wondering where that £2 million went.

When we took a look at the entirety of the programme, we could see on the EU database all the projects that have been allocated, and there seems to be a level of slippage in the programme. In the first round, £5 million in total and £3 million of the ESF element was unspent in the first round of ESF funding. So we were wondering where that went as well.

We would like the Committee to take a look at where those underspends have gone and how DEL can envisage there being no decommitment on the programme, given the way that it has run.

**The Chairperson:** We have got the general thrust of what you are saying. You have done some very good detective work. Maybe, we will have questions on that and then you can say a bit more. Unless there is something else you want to say before we do that. Is that OK?

**Ms K Magennis:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** There are a couple of things that intrigue me. When the amount of money is set and the Department is going to allocate up to that level and sets the benchmark at 134, applications are made and it allocates all the money to those who have reached 134. Am I right that it allocates all the money?

**Ms Blayney:** My understanding is that the benchmark is 130. When the Department looked at the applications that it had received, it ranked them and realised that it could not fund those below 134.

**Mr Allister:** So, effectively, the benchmark became 134.

**Ms Blayney:** It moved it.

**Mr Allister:** It distributed all of the money?

**Ms Blayney:** It intended to, but two projects —

**Mr Allister:** Before we get to that point, did the Department, on paper, distribute all of that money?

**Ms Blayney:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** Any applicant who challenged their score had a right of appeal.

**Ms Blayney:** Yes.

**Mr Allister:** How could they ever have succeeded on appeal if there was not money?

**Ms Blayney:** We did appeal, and we asked whether money was set aside for any potential successful appeals. We were advised that there was not.

**Mr Allister:** So, the appeal process was farcical, was it not?

**Ms Blayney:** It could have been perceived as a paper exercise.

**The Chairperson:** How are your political aspirations going, Alison? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Allister:** If you are sitting at 133, one might think that, on appeal, it would not be that difficult to squeeze another point. If you squeeze another point, there is no money to pay you, so you are unlikely to be given the extra point. Is that what you suspect?

**Ms Blayney:** In the previous application that we made for the initial phase prior to this one, we scored 171. This programme was wider. It covered the majority of the Province, encompassing east Down, north Down, east Belfast, Ballynafeigh, Loughguile, the north-west, Fermanagh, mid-Ulster, Lurgan, Portadown and the Falls. It was a regional programme that was marked around 40 points lower than the previous application.

**Mr John Mooney (Training for Women Network):** The criteria had not changed, so what the Department was looking for when marking the application should not have changed. It also advised —

**Mr Allister:** In making those points, as I am sure you did at your appeal, you had a reasonable expectation that you could overturn the 133 figure.

**Ms Blayney:** Certainly.

**Mr Allister:** The counterbalance to that was that, if you were permitted to do that, the money had already been spent.

**Ms Blayney:** There was no funding. That is correct.

**Mr Allister:** Did anyone succeed on appeal?

**Ms Blayney:** Not to our knowledge.

**Mr Allister:** It was not that there was over-provision. We have a situation where there is an underspend of £2.5 million. Had any over-provision been built in, in anticipation of an underspend?

**Ms Blayney:** I do not think so.

**The Chairperson:** You may not know the answer to that. It is a question for the Department, probably. We will pick up on that, Jim. If you know the answer, you can tell us, Alison, but we do not expect you to know.

**Mr Allister:** In the supplementary paper that you gave us, you say that, under priority one, the total projects allocated amounts to £74,700,000 and that the round one underspend is £3 million. It states that the total allocated under the social fund is £71 million or €78 million. Your paper also states that, under priority one, the allocation was €95 million. How do those figures fit together?

**Ms K Magennis:** We do not know. The £71 million relates to the €95 million. We cannot tell where the difference is.

**Mr Allister:** Does that mean that we did not draw down all that we could have drawn down in priority one?

**Ms K Magennis:** Commitment-wise, it looks as though there is an issue with the spend and the N+2 rule. That will be contained in the departmental figures. We are not fit to tell. It is an issue with commitment as opposed to spend.

**Mr Allister:** Do you think that it might be the N+2 factor?

**Ms K Magennis:** There might be undercommitment in the programme, which would lead you believe that there could be underspend in the programme towards the end. That is the feeling from the figures.

**Mr Allister:** Who gains out of that, so to speak?

**Ms K Magennis:** At the moment, no one gains out of it.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Department gain?

**Ms K Magennis:** We do not know whether there is movement between priority one and priority two. We believe that there are complicated mechanisms to move money between priority one and priority two in Apprenticeships NI, which is a government-led programme.

**Ms Blayney:** The term I have heard used is "internal easement". I think that one of the answers to an Assembly question stated that internal easement would be used.

**The Chairperson:** Do not take this the wrong way, but this has been a great education for us on internal auditing in ESF and whatever. It is very good.

**Mr Allister:** Internal easement sounds like borrowing money from Peter to pay Paul.

**The Chairperson:** It is a transfer.

**Ms Blayney:** It could be perceived that way.

**Mr Allister:** But you could not possibly comment.

**Ms Blayney:** I could not possibly. Through the programme, 40 people would have been employed, and there would have been 9,000 learning places in some of the most disadvantaged areas, where people are asking to be trained in low-level training schemes, which can hopefully progress them into further and higher education. They are not going to walk through the doors of the local colleges to do those programmes.

**Mr Allister:** Chairman, I think we need to hear from the Department.

**The Chairperson:** I think you are right, Jim. Rest assured, we have got the gist of what you are saying about the financial issues and, of course, putting that to one side, the opportunity that you offer lots of people. We will see if we can get a bit more detail out. As Mr Allister has already indicated, we will have a look at it in more detail.

**Mr P Ramsey:** It is very hard to follow the forensic mind of Jim.

**The Chairperson:** Or even the non-forensic mind of Jim, sometimes. Even that is tricky enough.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have a few comments, and then some questions. It is certainly a huge worry for the groups, because it is mainly crèche and childcare provision, outreach work and the part-time tutors in the various fields that are losing, collectively. Outside of the appeal process, did you have a head-to-

head with any senior officials to try to draw your own conclusions or get their assistance on lessons learned for you in going forward? Has anything like that happened?

**Ms Blayney:** There have been several meetings.

**Ms Hogg:** There were meetings just before the last election. At that stage, we had an initial meeting with Brian Crowe, who was Danny Kennedy's PA, but then he resigned the next day. Maybe if I had offered some kind of favours —

**The Chairperson:** Moving swiftly on — *[Laughter.]*

**Mr P Ramsey:** I think I will move to another question. *[Laughter.]*

**Ms Hogg:** We then had meetings with Brian Smart.

**Mr P Ramsey:** You scored significantly well the first time, with a high score of points, then, all of a sudden, those points have dropped. Was there any explanation of where you failed the criteria?

**Ms Blayney:** We have not had a satisfactory answer as to the huge difference. If it was two or three points you could understand that it may have been different people marking, but we have not had a satisfactory answer to such a differentiation.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I have another question, and I am sure the Chair will say it is not for you, but if there was the underspend that you have identified through the intelligence gathering that you have done, was the Department not in a position to redistribute that to groups that did not —

**The Chairperson:** You have answered your own question. That is not a question that they can answer. They have made their appeal and gone off. We will call the Department and ask it.

**Mr P Ramsey:** In advance of that, perhaps you could share, through the Clerk, any of the written Parliamentary questions that you have tabled and the responses to them so that we have them in advance of that meeting.

**The Chairperson:** Your point is correct, but the folks would not be in a position to answer that.

**Ms Gildernew:** You are very welcome, and thank you very much for a good piece of work. Coming up here with your facts is certainly very helpful.

We have written to the Department. Cookstown district is in my area, and we were at the Dungannon First Steps centre a number of months ago, if members remember back, when we saw some of the work that they do there. Fermanagh is in my constituency as well. I am very concerned. I know your client base, and I know that they do not have the confidence to go and seek training or upskilling in the local FE college or whatever. There are issues there about self-worth and their ability to do a job.

Many of the women that you have been training up have been at home raising families, and that step into the workplace is very scary. I find it really hard to comprehend. We all know about, and have been fighting like hell on, welfare reform, but we know that welfare reform is coming. We know that we are going to be inundated. The system will not be able to cope with the amount of people who have been told that benefit is no longer available to them and they need to get a job. Then, they find that they do not have any qualifications or skills and that they need to upskill and prepare themselves for the workplace.

We know that that is coming down the line. Are we preparing for it? No, we are not. I am very concerned about going from a score of 170-plus to close to the European threshold of 130, which a lot of them are. Moving the bar from 130 to 134 is one thing, but the worrying thing is that you have dropped 30 points and, as Basil pointed out, you have not even been properly debriefed. If you had gone through the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) for a contract for public procurement and did not get it, you would be entitled to a debriefing. You would be entitled to a feedback exercise to tell you where you slipped up and missed those 30 points. If you have not got answers to that question, I suggest that it is because there is not an answer.

**The Chairperson:** I think we will take up that point, Michelle; we will get into that in detail. I have a suggestion for the Committee about how we progress, but we will take your points on board.

**Ms Gildernew:** Sometimes, it is hard to quantify the confidence-building work that you do. However, we can quantify the number of women who have got training and the number of children you have put through your crèche. People know what it is like to struggle to pay for childcare. The fact that your children are being minded on site and that you know where they are removes the barrier that a lot of women face. Give us statistics on how many people have gone for different courses and different educational or training opportunities, and provide us with a picture of the amount of people you have helped to get into employment, or whatever. That would help us. We need to speak to the Department about this. I wrote to the Minister a number of months ago on that and got a very unsatisfactory response.

**Ms Hogg:** I work at grass-roots level in my capacity as manager of Cookstown and District Women's Group. That centre will close in November, because its Peace money will run out. In the past year, we have had 585 women. In the past week, I have had two women come in; one was a victim of abuse, and the other had been gang-raped. I work with women offenders. Michelle, you are saying that these people are coming off benefits. We have two counselling rooms in full-time operation with volunteer counsellors, because people cannot cope with the fact that they have been taken off benefits. That has a devastating impact. We have never been DEL or government-funded; we have relied totally on Peace money, and we will be closed at the end of November.

**The Chairperson:** Mary, we understand and appreciate your distress. You will find that this Committee is quite exercised about helping you. You have brought in a number of quite complicated issues. There is the technical side of things, which Kathleen brought up, and we are looking at those as well. I am pleased that you have had the opportunity to tell us what this means in reality. Understand that we are absolutely sympathetic. As you sit and watch here, we intend to do something about this. I do not want to pre-empt what my colleagues have to say; I want people to have a chance.

This is the right forum and the right place; let us see what the Committee can do to help. We are not making platitudes. Bear with us; we will ask a few more questions. We will need to take several lines of attack to deal with the issue, but I will sum it up at the end, and you will see where we are going with it.

**Mr Douglas:** Thank you very much for your presentation. I suppose that the Chair is right, and there are people on this Committee who represent all the areas that you are talking about and are aware of your work across Northern Ireland. I am aware of the excellent work that is carried out in the likes of Kilcooley with Alison, and in the Short Strand. I am aware of the impact that it has on those areas.

I am very angry to see that centres are closing, as a result of this. I think you mentioned those closures in your report, Alison. I know that Michelle talked about the future. We are all fearful of welfare reform and how it is going to impact on the most disadvantaged areas. I am sure that your work has increased, because as people lose their jobs or become part-time, it must increase your work.

The Training for Women Network has a long track record and has been about for some time. How long have you been going? I find it bizarre that DEL officials, who are marking your application and proposal, know about the work that you do right across Northern Ireland. They will know of your track record, so why was it marked so low? That is what I do not understand.

**The Chairperson:** You are right in your question, but that is actually the question that they are asking you.

**Mr Douglas:** All I am saying is that the DEL officials will be aware of all the work that you are involved in.

**Mr Allister:** I know that you do a lot of work that was Peace funded. Is there any duplication between your Peace application and your DEL application that could have caused anyone to say that an element is being picked up elsewhere?

**Mr Mooney:** There is no economic element to Peace, so the two applications would be very different. The ESF would focus on that side of things, whereas the Peace programme would not.

**Mr Allister:** Do you sense that there was any duplication?

**Ms Hogg:** I work at grass-roots level, and they are totally different participants. One is economically focused and the other is about victims and widows, and so on. Therefore, they were two totally different programmes.

**Mr Allister:** Were there different staff?

**Ms Hogg:** No. As a manager, I apportioned some time to ESF and some time to Peace.

**Ms Blayney:** The Training Women Network Peace III programme is purely delivering level 2 and level 3 peace and reconciliation training, which, while commendable, will not enhance employment opportunities.

**Mr Allister:** Part of your problem is compounded by the fact that you did not get the third stage of your Peace funding.

**Ms Blayney:** That reinforces the other pressures.

**Ms Gildernew:** Jim has made a good point. If you did not get a debriefing, you have to work out for yourself where it possibly went wrong. Therefore, that is helpful, and it gives the panel food for thought.

**The Chairperson:** There are a couple of things that I was going to suggest. Do not feel excluded from this conversation, since you know a fair bit about it, but how do members feel about what we should do next? I have a number of things that I would like to do, but what would members like to do?

**Ms Gildernew:** You tell us what you are thinking first, and we will tell you if we think it is a good idea.

**The Chairperson:** There are a number of issues here. First, there is the departmental allocations, the internal easements, the way that the ESF, the match funding and all of that operates. We want to get a departmental briefing on the generality of what they are doing with that money. I have always felt that ESF just goes into some sort of bucket somewhere. Therefore, I want to do that as a technical bit.

I also think there is an issue about the competition element of procurement. The Department does not appear to have managed the process in a way that maximises the drawdown. If I understand what the network is telling me, 100% was allocated and two dropped out, and the Department did not reallocate in some way. That seems to me to be a very strange state of affairs. Therefore, I want to know the process. That is a second presentation almost. So the first one was about ESF and the second was about the process that it has gone through here. The third issue is that we will not have much business towards the end of this session, and I wonder if the Committee is minded to have a debate on the issues that have been raised here so that we could bring it to the Floor of the Assembly.

We would get Cathie to draft a suitable motion, and we could get it out, front and centre. However, I would like to have the presentations from the Department first.

**Mr P Ramsey:** That is most important.

**The Chairperson:** There is quite a bit of work in this.

If you do not mind me saying it, Mary, you have spoken modestly, but with great strength, about the impact of what has gone on. We get a lot of presentations from a lot of good people. The four of you are a devastating combination, from your financial acumen, to talking about the emotional impact that this is having. I want to find a way for the Committee to really understand all of this. I read the briefing note, which is like a list of jobs going. It is there in black and white. However, that is not quite as impactful as hearing or seeing it. I want to find a way to get across the real value that your organisation has and what will happen if things close.

We can bring you back when we bring the Department back, but not to talk about the financial side, because we have got that. You might want to bring along some people you feel are up to it to talk to us, as well as yourself, so that they can explain their situation. You have heard the questions about whether it is Peace funding or benefits. We need a bit more information to understand what is happening on the ground.

I put it to the Committee that we try to schedule those four things.

**Mr P Ramsey:** We are all agreed, Chair.

**The Chairperson:** It is quite complicated, but we will get Cathie to sort it out. It is a serious thing that we want to do. We will write to the Department and send a copy of the Hansard report. I would like this dealt with this side of the recess because of the time pressures that Mary highlighted.

**Mr Allister:** Are you anticipating asking for a paper from the Department in advance of officials coming to give evidence, or will you simply be calling them to give evidence?

**Ms Gildernew:** To add to that, should we be looking for a research paper?

**The Chairperson:** We could do that as well.

**Ms Gildernew:** You might get more out of a research paper.

**The Chairperson:** Absolutely, Michelle. That is fine; we will do that. Jim's point is that we should probably have the departmental paper first, so that we can look at the numbers and ask meaningful questions of the Department.

**Mr Allister:** I would like to see the Department commit itself in writing rather than officials coming in trying to baffle us with all sorts.

**The Chairperson:** Cathie is suggesting that 13 June would be when the Committee would look at that. I also want her to schedule a debate in the Assembly on the motion that will come through from the Committee. I want that debate before 5.30 pm. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr P Ramsey:** To be fair to the Business Committee, if you make a request for an earlier time slot, it will be granted.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Pat; I am glad to hear that. Make sure that that is in the report, Mr Hansard.

Is the Committee content with that general thrust? We will get a research paper. We will write to the Department to say specifically, as Mr Allister requested, that we want a paper from the Department a week in advance. I will just tell them that that is what I want. I presume that I have the support of the Committee. The Department should know what the figures are. The Committee will meet on 13 June. Then, we will have the debate after that. We will have the research paper done as well. Is there anything else people can think of? If there is nothing at the moment, but you later want to bring something forward, you can tell Cathie, and she will try to put it in.

Are you happy with what we have gone through? Have we missed anything?

**Ms Blayney:** No, I think that that is everything. On behalf of the four of us, thank you very much. In the period of cuts that everybody is facing, we just want to maximise the EU money that is available. Nobody wants to see anything decommitted.

**The Chairperson:** We understand that, and you understand that our role is only to shine a light on things; we do not have a magic wand. However, we will look at what we can do. We are exercised and engaged in this process and will do what we can. You will be invited to that meeting, and can bring people along. Cathie will talk to you in advance about how best to structure that.

**Mr Douglas:** Can I just check, will we also be asking them about the whole process and how this was scored? I am wondering whether questions will be asked about that assessment and the negative impact and cost there will be if this is not funded.

**The Chairperson:** We will have a chat. I do not know the exact propriety of it, so I will check, but I am interested in going through the scoring matrix. To be clear, I want two presentations from the Department. I want to understand the ESF and funding issues that Jim brought up. I also want to understand the scoring matrix in respect of this particular issue, what happened to the funding, what they did next and how much allocation went back in. Sammy, you can ask the Department about that. The third presentation will be from the Training for Women Network, to explain what it has to contribute. If anybody has anything else they want to put in, they can.

OK. Thank you all very much.